

*Gudule*  
by Mary Kyle Dallas

There are prisons in all large towns. There is one, of course, at Alt Breisach, a German town at Baden on the Rhine, twelve miles west of Freiburg. It is an old building, and lately it was found that it needed great repairs. Consequently, a certain portion of the edifice—that in which the most important prisoners were usually confined—was vacated, and masons and carpenters set to work to re-build, enlarge, and improve certain cells, which, in the progress of humanity, were now considered too small, dark, and unhealthy even for a condemned murderer.

The mouldy walls were laid bare to the sunlight, the stone floors pried up, windows cut and ventilation supplied, and, in the course of all these alterations, a discovery was made. A certain stone in the walls of one of these cells had been dislodged at some past time, and behind it lay concealed a package of paper, a little cup that must have contained ink, and some quill pens. These the workman into whose hands they fell carried directly to the superintendent of the prison, fancying that he had perhaps discovered some grave plot. But, on examination, the paper bore the date of fifty years back and was only an autobiography. It ran thus:

“Before this meets any human eye I shall belong to the past. Indeed, a condemned criminal is no longer of this world. Therefore, I speak of myself as of one who has ceased to exist. My name was Bernhard Rolfsohn. I was the son of a wealthy and high-born landholder.

“I lived at Alt Breisach, on the Rhine, in an old house perched upon the highest and rockiest point. It stands quite by itself, its garden surrounded by a high stone wall, with an iron gate, on which hung a great lion’s head knocker. Over the wall ran ivy, and ivy covered half the house. In it dwelt three people—my servant, Pierre, his wife, and myself. I seldom went down into the town, but I was not without interest in what went on there. On the roof of my house was placed a strong telescope, which could be set in any direction. Through this I could see the streets, the shops, the people at work in the great tobacco warehouses. I could see, also, the blue water of the Rhine, the craft going to and fro; or, turning my glass the other way, see the peasants toiling in the tobacco fields on the rocky bluffs beyond.

“So I watched the little world about me, making friends with none of its inhabitants.

“Twenty years before, on the eve of my wedding-day, my betrothed, Gulude Ertevan, had eloped with a worthless fellow named Carl Moreaux.

“I was only one-and-twenty then, and she but just seventeen, and she had been dearer to me than my life. Her treachery made a strange change in me. I doubted all men, and all women, from that moment. I abandoned all friendships, and when, in the course of years, my parents died, I became a complete recluse. My books, my telescope, which I turned upon the town and the river by day and upon the sky by night, were my only companions. In solitude I walked under the old pear-trees in the garden, and thought of the past. When I thus thought, all the years that had gone by were as one. If Gudule Ertevan had lifted the latch of the great gate and entered, fair, young, and lovely as she was when I last saw her, I should not have been surprised.

“But time passed on, and I never even heard what had become of the poor girl.

“One day, as I paced my garden, in a deep reverie. I lifted my eyes and saw a woman standing without the gate. Her hands clung to the iron rods; her face was pressed against them; her garb was poor, and her worn shoes dusty; on her head she wore only a tattered yellow silk kerchief.

“For a moment I fancied her a common beggar; then I recognized her. The face was older; the complexion less fresh and brilliant; but despite these changes, it was Gudule into whose eyes I looked.

“I advanced a step or two, trembling with agitation.

“‘Bernhard,’ murmured the soft voice I knew so well— ‘Bernhard, do you not know me? I have nothing to say. I cannot forgive myself. I do not hope that you will forgive me; but I have travelled on foot for weary miles. I am starving faint. I come to the best friend I ever had, for charity—only for charity.’ And she sank down upon her knees in the dust of the road.

“‘My husband is dead,’ she murmured, hiding her face. ‘Oh, how cruelly he used me. I have been beaten, insulted; I have suffered starvation and cold. He was never true to me—never kind; and for him I left a good, good man who loved me and whom I soon knew I also loved.’

“Before she uttered these last words I had opened the gate; when they were spoken I knelt and raised her in my arms.

“‘He loves you still, Gudule,’ I said, and led her in.

“Now, indeed, it seemed as though that the ugly old story were but a dream. Warmed, clad in rich raiment that had been my mother’s, satisfied with food, comforted with rare wine. Gudule grew more beautiful than I had ever seen her. My love blazed up afresh. I wooed her once more, and she promised to be mine. In three days we were married. All the little world of Alt Breisach stared at us as we stood before the altar; but I was proud and happy, and no longer feared the eye of my fellow-man. Those days of my early wedded life were as happy as any man may experience upon this earth.

“My home was no longer a sort of hermitage. I welcomed guests to my dwelling. I entertained them heartily. I walked down into the town at times. I attended the services at the cathedral. I became like other men. And this happiness lasted without a flaw for six months. Perhaps I might never have known that I was not utterly blest but for a strange whim of mine.

“I loved my wife so fondly that I could not bear to lose her from my sight even for a moment.

“When, a few weeks after our wedding, she began to take long, solitary walks—an old whim of hers, she told me—I used to steal to my roof and watch her out of sight. She always took the winding road that led past the fortifications; through my glass I could see her as plainly as though she were in the garden. Sometimes I lost her behind the trees, or buildings, or shrubbery, but again she would appear upon the heights.

“I never told Gudule of this habit of mine; but, like all my habits, it became a fixed one.

“Day after day, out of pure love, I watched my beautiful wife in what she supposed to be her solitary rambles.

“One day, when this had been going on for some time, I saw, on the strip of rocky road beneath a certain fortification, which was the most solitary spot of which one could dream, the figure of a man—a low, rude looking creature, with a red kerchief knotted about his neck. As my wife approached, I saw him step toward her. She paused. He laid his hand roughly on her arm. I trembled so that I shifted the glass, and, for an instant, could see nothing. When I looked again the man was alone, counting some money that he held in his hand. Only an insolent beggar, who had, perhaps, frightened my darling. But when she returned she did not speak of the event, though she seemed nervous and a little unlike herself. Was it that she did not wish to alarm me? I watched her on her walks with even more interest than before. She seemed more to need my care. For some time my wife took her walks unmolested; but, at last, I, from my observatory, saw once more the slouching figure, with the red kerchief about its neck, lurking beside the rocks. Again my wife passed by. Again he laid his hand upon her arm. Again she gave him money. But his air was not humble or respectful, as a beggar’s should have been. This time I awaited Gudule’s return with impatience, but again she told me nothing.

“Why repeat the same story? Ere long it became my constant occupation to watch meetings which I could not doubt were preconcerted between these two. I saw him menace her with his hand; I saw her weep; but I could not comprehend what I saw. I crushed down the doubts that arose within my soul; I clung to my faith in her. Some one connected with her old unhappy life had appeared upon the scene of her happiness, I said, and my Gudule was fearful of annoying me. She bribed him not to trouble me; that was all. Yet what was the likeness that I saw? Whom did this fellow resemble?

“At last, upon a chill November day, I saw the man pacing under the cliff, and resolved to be present at his meeting with Gudule. Whoever he was, whatever business with my wife, I should assert my right to protect her. What harm could he do her with her loving husband by her side? Gudule was but a timid woman, and had many fears, that were quite groundless, no doubt. After all, if exposure was what she dreaded, all Alt Breisach knew the story—knew that she had been Carl Moreaux’s wife; that she returned to her native place a widow, and she was now mine by the laws of God and man. What was there to fear?

“I left the observatory, donned hat and cloak, put a pistol in my belt, and followed my wife’s light feet along the rocky road, gaining the shadow of an overhanging cliff and frowning fortress a few moments after the two had met.

“Gudule stood facing the stranger. I saw that she was deadly pale; her hands were clenched, her teeth set, her eyes glittered.

“‘Not enough?’ she was saying in a low but furious tone. ‘Not enough? I tell you I will bear this no longer! You shall have nothing, if you use me so!’

“‘Nothing, my lady?’ said the man. ‘We shall see. Do you not understand that if I am not satisfied I will have you—yes, you, your dainty self? You belong to me. You are mine—not his. Give me all the money I ask you for. Satisfy all my demands, or I shall prove to Bernard Rolfsohn that you were my wife when you married him. Yes, *and that you knew it.*’

“I knew him now—it was Carl Moreaux. He was not dead. Had Gudule indeed known this when she came to me?

“For all answer she wrung her white hands.

“‘Cruel as you always were,’ she said, ‘you left me to starve or beg. You were dead to me. I returned to the man I loved, even when your snares so blinded me that I believed I loved you. Man, do not tempt me too far. I bid you beware! What I give you is my own through Bernhard’s generosity. I can get no more. Tell me where I can send this sum—an ample one for all your wants. I will swear that you shall have it regularly, but I will see you no more.’

“‘Pah!’ cried the wretch. ‘You are in my power.’

“‘And I will be so no longer,’ answered Gudule. She drew her right hand from beneath her mantle, with a sudden motion. I heard the report of fire-arms. The air was full of smoke. As I started forward, my wife darted past me like a young deer; and I saw lying on the ground a bleeding figure, struggling in the agonies of dissolution.

“I knelt beside him. Above me was a sound of feet. Soldiers were descending from the fortress.

“‘How did this happen?’ cried one.

“‘I saw some one running up the road,’ said another.

“‘Only a frightened woman,’ said I, hoarsely.

“‘It is this man who has committed the murder,’ said a soldier.

“They bore me to prison. I was tried for my life. The mate to the pistol in my belt was found beside the dead man, and a proof of the motive of my crime was, as all believed, found in the papers on his person, which proved him to be Carl Moreaux, Gudule’s real husband.

“Tomorrow I die. I should not have confessed the truth even now and thus, but that they have told me that my poor Gudule, after a brief season of madness, is dead.

“I might save myself from this ignominious fate, perhaps, but I do not care to live; all that made life happy has left this world. God have mercy upon my soul and upon hers.”

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